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Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Contemporary Thought

Revisiting the Horror with Lacoue-Labarthe

Edited by

Nidesh Lawtoo

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4

A frame for 'The Horror of the West'

NIDESH LAWTOO

Pour Philippe, le rapport à la littérature—c'est-à-dire à la mimesis—était prégnant.[1]

JEAN-LUC NANCY, *'D'une "mimesis sans modèle"'*

Reading Lacoue-Labarthe is always a challenging experience, and this challenge is accentuated when the reader encounters his thought for the first time. Part of the difficulty emerges from an assumption not uncommon among contemporary French philosophers: when Lacoue-Labarthe approaches a specific problem, author, text or – as it is the case with 'The Horror of the West' – all of the above, the entirety of his thought is 'always already' *en jeu*. His reading of Conrad is thus not simply an interpretation among others, nor is it a way for the French philosopher to apply his 'approach' or 'method' to *Heart of Darkness*. Rather, Lacoue-Labarthe addresses the difficult 'truth' *about* the West Conrad wants his readers to 'see', and, in order to do so, he implicitly mobilizes the entirety of his own thought *on* the West. This also means that the textual economy of 'The Horror of the West' exposes the reader to the fundamental literary, philosophical and ethico-political concerns that traverse the entirety of Lacoue-Labarthe's *oeuvre*. For this reason alone, it can be a real challenge to gauge the stakes, implications and ramifications

of his evaluation of *Heart of Darkness* as 'one of the greatest texts of Western literature' (111).

This is obviously not the place to attempt a general introduction to Lacoue-Labarthe's thought. Such introductions already exist and the reader will undoubtedly benefit from them.[2] At the same time, a brief and necessarily partial introductory frame (or preface) to his essay on *Heart of Darkness* could facilitate a first approach to what has already been called an 'event' for literary studies (Hillis Miller). The present essay joins arms with Hillis Miller's admirable 'Prologue' in order to help readers catch a preliminary glimpse of what Lacoue-Labarthe calls the 'truth of the West' (114) *Heart of Darkness* makes us see – and perhaps hear. The aim of this frame will be attained if it manages to clarify a few conceptual difficulties, indicate some theoretical signposts and, by doing so, amplify the chances to hear the contemporary relevance of Lacoue-Labarthe's untimely theoretical voice.

Philosopher-poet

I have mentioned in the 'Introduction' that Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe was an important French philosopher commonly associated with what goes under the rubric of 'theory' or 'poststructuralism', but this statement needs to be qualified. Like so many heterogeneous figures of his untimely generation, Lacoue-Labarthe's thought transgresses homogeneous definitions. Already during his lifetime his closest collaborators recognized in him a profound thinker who escaped easy identifications. Or, better, they recognized in him a thinker who problematized the very essence of identification. As Jacques Derrida puts it in 'Desistance': 'Assimilation or identificatory projection: these are what Lacoue-Labarthe constantly puts us on guard against'.[3] Hence, as we approach 'The Horror of the West', we should refrain from trying to 'identify' Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Conrad within the boundaries of a given movement, school or approach – if only because this identificatory urge is precisely what his essay warns us against.

We should also be careful not to identify Lacoue-Labarthe uniquely with philosophy. If it is true that Lacoue-Labarthe was first and foremost a philosopher,[4] it is equally true that he tended to adopt this title with reluctance. He was always the first to acknowledge

his fundamental debt to the Western philosophical tradition and to engage with the abyssal questions that emerged from it, and always the last to use the title of 'philosopher' in order to act as a figure of authority. Like Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean-Luc Nancy and so many of his generation, Lacoue-Labarthe liked to situate himself at the 'margins' of philosophy. But if he treated this term with extreme precaution it is perhaps also because Lacoue-Labarthe was never *only* a philosopher. As his last name already suggests, his identity was at least double: A man of many sides, protean in his interests and approaches, Lacoue-Labarthe was a heterogeneous, mimetic thinker who worked at the *juncture* where literature and philosophy, emotion and thought, meet, challenge and confront each other. As his lifelong friend and colleague, Jean-Luc Nancy succinctly puts it: 'This is how he was a philosopher—against philosophy'.[5]

Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophical and literary interests spanned from the Greeks to the Romantics and beyond, into Modernism and Postmodernism. Fascinated by the Ancient problematic of mimesis – the conceptual *Leitmotif* of his thought – he did not hesitate to link Plato's and Aristotle's 'mimetology' to the Romantic take on 'genius', the psychoanalytical 'unconscious' to different forms of 'madness', aesthetic concerns with *techne* to political concerns with fascism and will to power. If 'The Horror of the West' is an 'event' for literary studies, it is also because all these problematics inform his reading of *Heart of Darkness* – and many others too. In fact, we should not forget that Lacoue-Labarthe was also a prolific translator (of Nietzsche, Benjamin, but especially Hölderlin), an acute interpreter of psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan, but also Reik), *connaisseur* of music (from opera to jazz and blues),[6] a politically and ethically engaged thinker (most notably of the Holocaust) and, as critics are now beginning to recognize, a poet in his own right.[7]

Lacoue-Labarthe's literary interests were particularly focused on the Romantic tradition and culminate in his career-long engagement with Hölderlin but, for us, it is important to stress that Lacoue-Labarthe was equally fascinated by Anglo-American modernists. As Jean-Luc Nancy says, his friend was a passionate reader of 'Malcolm Lowry, Conrad, Faulkner, as well as T. S. Eliot'.[8] Conrad obviously occupied a special place in Lacoue-Labarthe's thought because he is the only British modernist he felt the need to write about. This is

perhaps not surprising since, as we shall see, so many of his literary and philosophical interests find expression in *Heart of Darkness*. Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Conrad can thus not be dissociated from the rest of his protean *oeuvre*, which, while not being a system, constantly returns to that juncture where literature and philosophy, emotion and thought, *pathos* and *logos*, meet, dialogue and, above all, affect and reflect (on) each other.

Framing the frame

Given the heterogeneous dimensions of Lacoue-Labarthe's investigations, one might wonder what, exactly, led him, towards the last decade of his life, to comment on *Heart of Darkness*. The reasons are undoubtedly manifold, obscure and cannot be easily explained. As Lacoue-Labarthe himself puts it, they belong to 'the realm of fascination' (112). This fascination for Conrad's tale was far from being new. It dated back to his youth, to a period when Lacoue-Labarthe's destiny was still suspended, as it were, between different possible trajectories. Not having chosen between the path of philosophy and the one of art (a choice which, strictly speaking, he will refuse to make), he considered filmmaking as a possible career. As he explains in an autobiographical essay, between the age of 20 and 25, under the spell of the seventh art, he 'thinks or, better, dreams, "cinema"'.[9] He even goes as far as writing scenarios for literary masterpieces he would like to see represented on the screen. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was second on his list of cinematic projects.

His script for *Heart of Darkness* was never finished, the film never made and Lacoue-Labarthe eventually took the path of philosophy. And yet, the fascination for Conrad continued to haunt him. Thus, much later in his career, upon seeing not a film, but a theatrical representation of *Heart of Darkness*, he fell, once again, under the spell of Conrad's tale. The play just over, the careful philosopher famous for his abundant use of quotation marks, dashes and interminable explanatory footnotes risked, in a moment of enthusiasm, the following evaluation: '*Heart of Darkness*', he said, 'is one of the greatest texts of Western literature' (111). 'The Horror of the West' is a philosophical explanation of the conceptual and affective motivations that inform this deeply felt aesthetic affirmation.

At first sight, Lacoue-Labarthe's opening does not seem ideal to inaugurate a new philosophical reading of *Heart of Darkness*. He comes at the text indirectly, speaking in what may appear to be an informal, even colloquial way. Originally delivered as a talk in the context of a seminar titled *Psychiatrie, Psychothérapie et Culture(s)* in 1995–6 (organized by the association *Parole sans frontière*), '*L'horreur occidentale*' is a text written, first of all, to be spoken.[10] And from its very first lines, it is clear that in the published version Lacoue-Labarthe did nothing to hide its original, oral dimension – a dimension Hannes Opelz and I did our best to preserve in the English version. Here is how Lacoue-Labarthe begins: 'The origin of these brief remarks lies in a rash phrase of mine [*une phrase imprudente*], the kind of declaration one cannot help but make on such occasions' (111). These opening remarks have an immediate ring. As Hillis Miller points out in his 'Prologue', readers feel personally addressed by what he calls the 'strong presence . . . of the author's voice',[11] a voice that adopts a confessional, autobiographical tone in order to share thoughts that are of the order of a lived, affective experience. Lacoue-Labarthe's implicit assumption that his listeners understand his allusive remarks to 'such occasions' and 'the kind of declarations' that ensue ('yes', one is tempted to reply, 'it happened to me too!') has the rhetorical function to create a bond, if not of intimacy, at least of shared complicity with his listeners. We already begin to see that such a beginning is not without echoes with the text under consideration (Marlow is addressing his listeners in intimate, familiar terms too), and the mimetic doublings, repetitions and echoes will unfold as we continue to frame Lacoue-Labarthe's framing of Conrad's tale.

At this stage, however, an academic suspicion may begin to arise. Such a mimetic, rhetorical strategy, one might say, may work for an audience tangentially interested in Conrad, but it might travel less well among an audience of readers who have turned *Heart of Darkness* into a privileged object of scholarly investigation. This suspicion is accentuated by the fact that, in this piece, Lacoue-Labarthe transgresses some of the most basic scholarly conventions: he does not position himself within the field; he does not rely on previous interpretations; he does not add a bibliography at the end. . . . Instead, he addresses his audience with what he calls, in all simplicity, some 'brief', 'inchoate' or as he also says, 'experimental remarks' (111, 112, 120) about *Heart of Darkness*. Furthermore,

he makes clear that the original impulse for his reflection is not Conrad's text itself but, rather, 'a theatrical representation of this text' (111) – and a representation offered in French. Not only doesn't Lacoue-Labarthe refer to the original version of *Heart of Darkness*, but he also adds another layer of mediation by taking as its starting point a theatrical representation of a French translation of Conrad's text – that is, an interpretation of yet another interpretation.

'Brief', 'inchoate remarks' based on an emotional response generated by a theatrical representation of *Au coeur des ténèbres*, dramatized in a Parisian theatre: these may appear to be tentative initial steps, indeed. But as readers of Lacoue-Labarthe have learnt to recognize, such steps are often but initial 'steps back' that allow him to subsequently leap ahead, into uncharted theoretical territory. In fact, in a philosopher-translator-theatrical man-poet who spent his life rethinking the Platonic conception of mimesis, the choice of adding a *theatrical* frame around Conrad's already densely layered narrative is not deprived of *theoretical* meaning. As Lacoue-Labarthe is fond of reminding us, the origins of the word 'theory' and 'theatre' are, indeed, the same, and they refer to *theorein*, looking attentively in order to *see* – a term which, as we know, is also central to Conrad's poetics. Lacoue-Labarthe's theatrical redoubling of Conrad's narrative frame is thus not the accidental move it may initially appear to be. On the contrary, Lacoue-Labarthe is consciously introducing a theoretical/theatrical device in order to *reframe*, in an allusive, deceivingly informal way, the fundamental formal and theoretical assumptions that will guide him throughout his entire investigation, assumptions about the relation between literature and philosophy, emotion and thought, mimesis and politics, voice and truth, origin and copy.

Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophical insights into what he calls 'the horror of the West' emerge upon witnessing a theatrical adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*, that is, a visual representation (*mimesis*) of a text whereby a mimetic actor (*mimos*) gives voice, in dramatic speech (mimetic *lexis*), to Conrad's tale. Here is how Lacoue-Labarthe describes the theatrical scene which makes him hear an echo of the horror:

> David Warrilow—the actor preferred by the later Beckett—drained by a serious illness and himself living his last moments, was telling Conrad's *tale*, in all simplicity, standing and leaning against the edge of the stage. The reading was in French, a language Conrad had nearly chosen as his own. It was overwhelming: suddenly one could hear this *tremendous* [*immense*] text as no other intimate or silent reading (even a painstaking one) could have allowed us to hear. We understood it—in all its breadth and depth. Warrilow's exhausted voice, in its sovereign *detachment*, prompted an emotion of thought [*émotion de la pensée*] which I daresay remains, to this day, incomparable (111).

Lacoue-Labarthe's reference to David Warrilow's theatrical voice and to the 'emotion of thought' that is conveyed through it may stray from conventional academic practices. And yet, it is perfectly in line with Conrad's/Marlow's communicative project to make their audience of listeners and readers both *feel* and *see* something which is of the order of the 'truth [they may] have forgotten to ask'.[12] Not unlike Conrad, Lacoue-Labarthe does not think it possible to access the traumatic experience of the horror directly. Thus, in his reading, he adds an additional frame to Conrad's tale, a theatrical, mimetic frame which, quite literally, *re*-presents (i.e. presents again, for a second time) *Heart of Darkness* on the theatrical scene. A mimetic representation of a text is thus at the source of a mimetic impersonation of a character/narrator and this impersonation gives voice to narrative events that may have taken place in the Congo. To use Plato's canonical terminology, we could say that the spectators in the theatre are not only twice but three times removed from the origin of this text.

We begin to see that Lacoue-Labarthe's apparently informal theoretical/theatrical frame allows him to implicitly engage with fundamental ontological assumptions concerning the inimical relation between philosophy and literature, art and reality, mimesis and truth. That Lacoue-Labarthe is operating within a Platonic conceptual universe is clear. A few paragraphs later, speaking of Plato's distinction of narrative modes, he says that Plato's categories are 'the only ones we have', and qualifies Conrad's narrative frame in terms of a '"mimetic" device [*dispositif "mimétique"*], something almost "theatrical"' (112). And what this medium reveals is that mimetic *distance* puts him, Lacoue-Labarthe, paradoxically, in a position to hear the text from an unprecedented degree of affective *proximity*. Thus, he says: 'one could hear this *tremendous* text as no other intimate or silent reading (even a painstaking one) could have

allowed us to hear' (111). For Lacoue-Labarthe, then, it seems that the further removed the spectator appears from the original voice, the closer he or she actually is.

This is, indeed, one of those paradoxes which, for the French philosopher, informs the logic of mimesis in the modern tradition, a paradoxical logic (or 'hyperbologic') which could be formulated as follows: the more it is distant to the original, the closer it is to truth; the closer it seems, the more distant it actually is. In this case, the pathos of Warrilow's mimetic voice (i.e. the voice of a dying mime) is the very *medium* that puts the listeners in the theatre in a position to 'hear', if not the horror of death itself, at least the echo of the voice of another mimetic figure (i.e. the voice of dying Kurtz). This additional *theatrical* frame doubles Kurtz's 'voice', echoes 'the horror' this voice attempts to convey and, by doing so, communicates an 'emotion of thought' that would have been difficult to experience so intimately had the spectator had access only to the original words on the page. Many critics have recognized the oral qualities of *Heart of Darkness*. Lacoue-Labarthe dramatizes this critical point in order to make a larger claim concerning the complex relation between mimesis and truth and, by extension, literature and philosophy. In fact, for him, mimesis is not inimical to truth, literature not antithetical to philosophy. On the contrary, philosophical truth requires a form of literary mimesis to become, if not fully visible, at least partially audible. Elsewhere, Lacoue-Labarthe goes even as far as making voice the very condition for writing as such. As he claims in *Phrase*, 'the phrase – *literature* – is oral./It needs voice [*Il y faut la voix*]'.[13]

Does this mean that the voice of the dying actor renders the experience of the dying hero of Conrad's fiction fully present? Does Lacoue-Labarthe assume that without such a full speaking presence, Kurtz's original phrase, '"The horror! The horror"' (149), would have remained impossible to hear? It is not so simple. Lacoue-Labarthe, along with Derrida, is deeply sceptical of the metaphysics of presence which privileges immediacy over mediation, speech over writing, revelation of truth over its dislocation. It is thus no accident that he relies on a theoretical/theatrical device in order to call attention to the different levels of *mediation* that are 'always already' at work in Conrad's *narrative* frame: Kurtz's dying words are reported by Marlow, whose words are reported by the frame narrator; and all these layers of mediation are now given expression

by an actor whose dying voice echoes, from an abyssal distance, the experience of the horror for a contemporary audience to hear. If we add to this that Lacoue-Labarthe is part of this theatrical audience and, in turn, feels compelled to theorize the 'emotion of thought' conveyed by Warrilow's voice by giving himself voice to a text written for yet another audience of listeners and, later, readers, we see the vertiginous degree of multi-layered formal mediation introduced by Lacoue-Labarthe's apparently informal frame.

How does Lacoue-Labarthe's mimetic frame relate to what it frames? How does this formal, mimetic device help us approach what the French philosopher calls, in a problematic phrase, 'the truth of the West', or the 'essence' of Kurtz (114, 115)? These are tricky questions. As Hillis Miller reminds us, words like 'essence' and 'truth' are 'totalizing', 'metaphysical' words, and it is 'hard to use them otherwise' (34). We should thus be careful with such concepts in order not to perpetuate what Nietzsche famously called 'The History of an Error'.[14] This said, another Nietzschean suspicion begins to emerge: Could it be that Lacoue-Labarthe's frame allows him to use these words otherwise, turning them against the totalizing metaphysical tradition from which they originate – in a playful, artistic way? Mimesis, as Lacoue-Labarthe understands it, is, indeed, linked both to presence and to absence, participation and observation, feeling and seeing, pathos and distance, revelation and dislocation. It is also a malleable, slippery and, above all, playful concept that constantly masks itself as it acts out its different roles on the theatrical scene. This mimetic play is tacitly but fundamentally at work in the initial pages of 'The Horror of the West'. These pages suggest that mimesis might get close to the 'truth', but never fully reveals it; it is a framing device which envelops such a revelation of 'truth' in multiple layers of quotation marks. In fact, if we take into consideration the carefully crafted theatrical frame whereby Lacoue-Labarthe starts, we begin to see or, better, hear or, better, read, that through Lacoue-Labarthe's account of Warrilow's voice, it is not the 'truth' itself that is revealed but, rather – to use a word that is central to Lacoue-Labarthe's understanding of mimesis – an 'echo' of the truth, 'a truth' which, as he himself reminds us, is 'too difficult to enunciate directly, to heavy or too painful – above all, too obscure' (114). Or, if you prefer Conrad's figure, we could say that Lacoue-Labarthe's frame creates a 'haze' around his metaphysical reading of 'the horror', a reading that renders visible a 'misty halo' that both

brings out the illuminating power of his *logos*, while at the same time also bracketing off transparent notions of 'essence' and 'truth'.

As these preliminary remarks suggest, the problematic of mimesis, while not always explicitly identified, appears from the beginning of the essay in all its polymorphous manifestations and in-*forms* everything that follows. Mimesis is, indeed, at the heart of Lacoue-Labarthe's conception of 'truth'. But unlike a stable reflection, representation or figuration in a mirror, this mimetic truth is a vanishing, retreating truth – like an echo is a vanishing, retreating doubling of an original voice that has already disappeared. As Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, the echo of a voice 'returns [*revient*], but in returning, loses itself'.[15] And it is this double-movement of appearance and disappearance, this 're(-)treat' [*retrait*] that Lacoue-Labarthe, in an impossible move characteristic of his thought as a whole, tries to capture.[16]

Perhaps, then, the theatrical frame which serves as the starting point for Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of *Heart of Darkness*, with its disconcerting doubling and redoubling of mimetic effects and affects, functions as an echo chamber where the actor's voice resonates and vanishes, becomes audible while disappearing and, by doing so, renders (in)visible the mimetic experience that, for Lacoue-Labarthe, is at the heart of Conrad's tale. As he puts it elsewhere, '[t]he theater is not mimesis, but the medium through which mimesis is revealed [*le révélateur de la* mimésis]'[17] – which does not mean that the theatre tells us what mimesis actually 'is,' but that it shows us something about what mimesis 'does'. In fact, what mimesis invites us to confront is what Lacoue-Labarthe calls – introducing another of his key philosophical-literary concepts – nothing less and nothing more than 'the myth of the West' (112).

Mythic mimesis

Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophical take on 'myth', like his take on 'mimesis', must be understood against the larger background of his philosophical *and* literary preoccupations. Lacoue-Labarthe tells us that he considers *Heart of Darkness* as a narrative that relies on the 'device of myth' in order to 'offer itself, by means of some *testimony*, as a bearer of truth' (113). What is at stake in this association between 'myth' and 'truth' is both a confrontation with, and an inversion

of, what Jacques Derrida calls 'the most constraining Platonic tradition'.[18] This underlying philosophical *agon* directly informs Lacoue-Labarthe's striking claim that what *Heart of Darkness* attempts to account for is 'the myth of the West' or, alternatively, 'the truth of the West' (114). How, we may wonder, can a 'myth' reveal the 'truth'? Why is the affective power of *muthos* linked to the rational power of *logos*? These oxymoronic connections are, indeed, at the heart of the 'emotion of thought' Lacoue-Labarthe encourages us to think – as a philosopher-poet, writing with and against philosophy.

As it was also the case with Nietzsche before him, the French philosopher-poet thinks with Plato, contra Plato, in order to account for *both* the power of revelation *and* the danger of intoxication in the modern resurgence of myth. *Contra* Plato, Lacoue-Labarthe claims that mythic narratives are far from being antithetical to the register of philosophical truth. Here is the key claim upon which the entirety of his reading of Conrad's tale *qua* 'myth' hinges. 'When I say, "*Heart of Darkness* is one of the greatest texts of Western literature," I am thinking, simultaneously and inextricably, of two things: its *mythical* power and what constitutes it as an *event of thought*' (112). This is clearly an anti-Platonic claim. In fact, Plato in Books 2 and 3 of the *Republic* – two books that loom large in Lacoue-Labarthe's thought, from *Typography* to 'The Nazi Myth' and beyond – condemned myths recited via a mimetic narrative device (most notably tragedy) for not telling the truth about the gods. Lacoue-Labarthe, on the other hand, argues that the register of myth and the one of truth are far from being antithetical and cannot, strictly speaking, be dissociated. Thus he says: '[i]t is impossible, in theory, to dissociate these two aspects' (112). And, then, in a characteristic *tour de force* which sums up his thesis about *Heart of Darkness* in a nutshell, he adds: 'The myth of the West, which this narrative [*récit*] recapitulates (but only in order to signify that the West is a myth), *is*, literally, the thought of the West' (112). The entire essay is a rigorous attempt to unfold the implications of this striking philosophical-literary affirmation – along both Platonic and anti-Platonic lines.

We have seen that *contra* Plato, Lacoue-Labarthe associates 'myth' with 'truth' in order to reveal something 'essential' about the experience of thought, but we should not forget that *with* Plato he insists that the question of myth opens up a fundamental ethico-political question that is at the heart of the Western body politic.

What worries Plato, and in a different sense Lacoue-Labarthe, is that myths (like any stories or fables heard in childhood or, nowadays seen on TV, the internet, videogames and other new mimetic inventions) provide subjects with models to imitate, *exampla* or, as Lacoue-Labarthe says, following Plato, 'types' that have the power to impress, figure and disfigure the malleable character of subjects.[19] The fundamental Platonic worry is that through such initial impressive spectacles and dramatizations, through this process of typographic impression (or 'onto-typo-logy'), myths are endowed with the power to shape both the characters and opinions of the entire body politic. The logic of Plato's concern with myth could thus be summed up in the following Socratic interrogations: tell me which stories you have been told in childhood and I will tell you which opinions you will have in adulthood; tell me who are your mythic figures and I shall tell you who will be your leader figures; or, closer to our own 'democratic', mass-mediatized societies, tell me which actors you like and I will tell you who you will vote for.

Now, if the French philosopher says that *Heart of Darkness* is a fiction endowed with what he calls the 'mythic power' to reveal the 'truth of the West', it is both in its Platonic and anti-Platonic sense that he mobilizes the concept of 'myth': anti-Platonic because this fiction reveals something *true*, not false, about the West; and Platonic because this fiction reveals the potentially *damaging* formative power of myths over the political destiny of the West. We can thus better understand why Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, in a text that has tremendous resonance with 'The Horror of the West' titled 'The Nazi Myth', define myth no longer simply as a 'spoken word' but, rather, as 'an instrument of identification'. And they add that myth 'is in fact *the* mimetic instrument par excellence'.[20] For the two philosophers, then, it is very difficult to keep the category of myth apart from the one of mimesis – if only because myths are, by definitions, *mimetic* mechanisms. In sum, Lacoue-Labarthe's account of *Heart of Darkness* as a 'mythic' tale that reveals 'the horror of the West' suggests that *mythic mimesis* is both an instrument of obfuscation and of illumination; it is both the problem and the solution to the problem or, if you prefer Plato's terminology, a poison and a medicine, that is, a *pharmakon*.[21]

We are beginning to realize that if Lacoue-Labarthe considers Conrad's 'mythic' tale as an 'event of thought', it is not so much

because this tale offers us magical metaphysical cures for all kinds of social pathologies. Nor because it offers us a stable, static and transparent sense of the 'truth' or 'essence' of the West that reflects (on) the horrors of colonialism and imperialism – no matter how important this reflection continues to be. But, rather, this text constitutes an 'event of thought' because in his view, *Heart of Darkness* offers us an illuminating and incisive diagnostic that unmasks, in a Nietzschean move that is not deprived of ironic masks, the metaphysical horror that lies 'beneath' the very *idea* of the West and continues, up to these days, to inform its darkest *praxis*. Put differently, Lacoue-Labarthe considers Conrad's mythic tale as a revelatory mimetic mechanism that diagnoses, according to a 'hyperbologic' whereby the poison is also the cure, the affective logic, the pathos and the logos, or if you prefer, the mimetic pathology, that informs these horrors – including the 'propensity for extermination'(119) which is constitutive of the West. What we must add now is that for Lacoue-Labarthe, these horrors, or better, 'the horror', is most clearly revealed in that apocalyptic event in Western history that, along with Nancy, he calls 'the Nazi myth'.[22]

Western barbarity

There are, of course, no easy, pre-packaged solutions to account for the horror that Lacoue-Labarthe, with Conrad, sees as constitutive of the West, from the darkness of its origins to the terror of its destiny. Yet, this *is* the fundamental problematic that Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of *Heart of Darkness* asks us to face. In order to conclude our mimetic account of the silent logic of 'The Horror of the West', we must keep in mind that when Lacoue-Labarthe speaks of Conrad's mythic text as an 'event of thought' that reveals – and here we should multiply quotation marks – the 'truth of the West' (114), he is aligning Conrad with an influential modern tradition which goes from Diderot to Nietzsche, Hölderlin to Heidegger and beyond.[23] And if Lacoue-Labarthe convokes this tradition, it is because he considers that Conrad not only fully belongs to it, but also successfully unmasks the metaphysical assumptions responsible for the ethico-political horrors of modernity.

Given the heterogeneous dimension of Lacoue-Labarthe's *corpus*, we should not be surprised to see that his culminating insights

into 'the horror' cannot easily be contained within a neatly sealed theoretical frame but spill over to address the artistic, psychic, ethical, political as well as metaphysical implications of Conrad's tale. I will attempt not to spoil the reader's first encounter with the remarkable complexity of Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis with my summary remarks. Schematically put, however, we could say that these insights emerge from two different, yet, related mimetic/mythic problematics: one concerning the identity of the 'mythic hero'; the other concerning the identity of 'the West'. These two levels may sound distinct (one psychological and interior, the other political and exterior), but they are both constitutive of Lacoue-Labarthe's single concern with the horror that haunts individual Western figures and the Western body politic as a whole.

Mr Kurtz, the tragic figure of Conrad's fiction, constitutes the driving *telos* of Marlow's narrative; he equally occupies a central place in Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis because he joins the two problematics the French philosopher has been developing from the first pages of his essay. Indeed, in Kurtz's voice – a 'universal genius' (154) who, we are told, is revered as a god and commits atrocities on a massive scale – the question of imitation (*mimesis*) and the one of fiction (*muthos*) join hands in order to make us hear a type of horror that, for Lacoue-Labarthe, is constitutive of the West in general and Western art (*techne*) in particular. Lacoue-Labarthe is particularly attentive to the tonality, caesuras and silences of Kurtz's affective 'voice' as it resonates throughout Conrad's tale (as well as through Warrilow's voice). He is equally aware that such a voice, and the horror it attempts to make us hear and see, cannot be confronted in a theoretical vacuum. Thus, he relies on his previous philosophical work (on mimesis, genius and *techne*, as well as on Plato, Diderot and Heidegger), using his philosophical references as a theoretical chorus to make the implications of Kurtz's artistic and political voice audible and visible. Drawing heavily on *L'imitation des modernes*, Lacoue-Labarthe argues that Kurtz's voice is characteristic of a mimetic 'artist' (or 'genius') as it emerges from the modern tradition. As he explains:

> the artist, or the genius, is he who is properly proper to everything [*proprement propre à tout*], or, if you prefer, having no property in himself [*propriété en lui-même*] (except this mysterious gift), he who is capable of appropriating them all for himself. (115)[24]

Kurtz, in other words, is nothing in himself, an empty, 'hollow' figure who is quite literally 'no one' (*personne*) (116). But according to a general law of mimesis whose 'hyperbologic' is now familiar to us, it is precisely because he is nobody that he can, paradoxically, become everybody; precisely because he has no proper gift that he can also re-produce the gift of different arts (from music to painting, political rhetoric to poetry), if not the gift of creation itself. As he puts it, this artistic figure (or *artiste maudit*) 'is perhaps the most decisive myth of the 19th century (and therefore also, in large part, of the 20th century)' (115).

So, the artist figure brings together the mimetic and mythic threads we have been following in our doubling, that is, mimetic commentary. But why should this mimetic being make us hear the horror at the heart of Conrad's 'myth' and, by so doing, reveal the 'truth' of the West itself? In order to gesture towards this realization, we must notice that the subject *of* this voice is *not*, strictly speaking, a subject, in the sense that he does not constitute a solid, unitary, substantial being, or *subjectum*. The modern subject, for Lacoue-Labarthe, might be moored close to the ground, yet its foundations rest on an abyssal ocean of darkness. There is thus an ontological void *beneath* the subject which, following Lacan, but thinking of a much older tradition that goes back to Augustine, Lacoue-Labarthe calls *la Chose*.[25] Lacoue-Labarthe is not primarily interested in psychologizing Kurtz or reading *Heart of Darkness* psychologically. If he reflects on Kurtz's interior void, as well as on the voice that resonates through him, it is because, in his view, this voice echoes a wider, exterior ethico-political horror that haunts modernity as a whole – and it is this interior/exterior horror that Lacoue-Labarthe, with Conrad, wants to make us hear and see.

Let us not forget that Conrad tells us that 'all Europe' contributed to the making of this figure with a German name, who is Kurtz. And according to a metonymical leap articulated most succinctly in 'The Nazi Myth'[26] and confirmed in Conrad's representation of Kurtz as a 'splendid leader of an extreme party' (154), Lacoue-Labarthe sees in this artistic/mythic character a wider Western vulnerability to the affective/conceptual will to the power of fascist leader figures.[27] This also means that the productive or 'general mimesis' that traverses Kurtz as an artist (*techne* as 'mimetic' art) has its counterpart in a passive or 'restricted mimesis' that Kurtz, as a leader figure, can put to use to subjugate others and enact

massive forms of sacrificial horrors (*techne* as 'technique of death'). As Lacoue-Labarthe explains: 'in the domain of art proper, as in the domain of power (or of political art, if you will), he subdues and fascinates; he attracts and seduces (he even arouses love); he subjugates [*assujettit*]: he is absolutely *sovereign*' (116). And he adds: 'All the material details suggest that its stakes concern the revelation of a *technique of death*. And this is, after all, the best definition of the Western will to power that may be given' (119). In such passages, we see how Lacoue-Labarthe's double concern with the now audible problematic of mimesis and myth come together in order to address the devastating power of *techne* and the apocalyptic destiny for the West it entails.[28]

For Lacoue-Labarthe, then, the horror of the West has Greek origins and stretches from the Roman to the Colonial empire and beyond, into more contemporary horrors. It becomes most clearly visible as hollow leader figures with charismatic voices will rely on mimetic devices in order to subjugate the masses in the Europe of the 1930s and 1940s. 'We know what followed', says Lacoue-Labarthe, allusively. And then he adds: 'what is remarkable is that he [Conrad] saw this with such precision – through the example of colonization' (117). Lacoue-Labarthe does not only argue that Conrad, like Nietzsche, senses the horror of fascism and Nazism coming and warns the future against it. He also adds that Conrad's mythic tale is an 'event of thought' because it reveals the fundamental reasons that continue to be responsible for the unprecedented atrocities committed in the name of Western ideals.

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Reading Conrad *avec* Lacoue-Labarthe is a way to make sure we do not forget to reflect on the horrors the West continues to generate – for others. And if it is tempting to neglect to ask for that 'glimpse of truth' Conrad struggles to make us see and hear, we should recall Lacoue-Labarthe's final, and perhaps most difficult-to-take, reflection on the horror of the West. Namely, that '[to] recoil from the horror is Western *barbarity* itself' (118).

As the reader is soon to find out, Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophical reading of *Heart of Darkness* is an impressively dense, often enigmatic, at times disputable, but always thought-provoking reading whose implications he leaves for the future to meditate.

As we are confronted with this difficult task, we should keep in mind that his claims about the horror of the West are but the tip of an iceberg formed by a lifelong reflection on the relation between mimesis and truth, myth and politics, literature and philosophy. Having now sketched this doubling frame, the only final piece of advice I can now offer is a doubling of what Jacques Derrida already says in 'Desistance': 'work at reading and rereading th[is] difficult text,' he writes. And then he adds, in a cautionary mood:

> If sometimes you have the feeling that you are dealing with a thinker who is panting or harried, don't kid yourself: you are reading someone who on the contrary is tracking—*polemos* without polemics—the most powerful thoughts of our tradition.[29]

Let us now allow this *polemos* to speak for himself. My hope is that this rather sketchy and – I am perfectly aware of it – incomplete theoretical frame will be of some help to keep up with a truly breathtaking reading experience.

Notes

1 'For Philippe, the relation with literature – that is to say, with mimesis – was pregnant with meaning' (my translation).

2 Jacques Derrida's seminal essay, 'Desistance' is, to my knowledge, still the most penetrating account of Lacoue-Labarthe's thought. For an English monograph on his thought, see also John Martis's *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: Representation and the Loss of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). For French readers, other introductions are also available. See André Hirt, *Un homme littéral: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe* (Paris: Kimé, 2011), and the special numbers devoted to Lacoue-Labarthe in journals such as *Europe*, *L'Animal* and *Lignes* where distinguished figures such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Alain Badiou, Avital Ronell and many others comment on the importance of Lacoue-Labarthe's thought in a relatively accessible, rigorous and thought-provoking way. Excellent starting points are Jean-Luc Nancy's meditations on Lacoue-Labarthe (see bibliography).

3 Jacques Derrida, 'Introduction: Desistance', in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. and trans. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 7.

4 Lacoue-Labarthe taught philosophy at the University of Strasbourg for most of his career, but he also occupied positions at the *ENS* and the *Collège de Philosophie* in Paris, as well as at Johns Hopkins and UC Berkeley.

5 Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe à Strasbourg', *Europe* 973 (2010): 13.

6 Given the text in question, it is perhaps not irrelevant to mention that 'blues' was also the last word of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Avital Ronell reports the last exchange of Philippe with his wife, Claire Nancy: '"It's not going very well." – "What do you mean? Physically or psychically" – "A sort of blues" ["*une sorte de blues*"], he answered. . . .' Avital Ronell, 'L'indélicatesse d'un interminable fondu au noir', *Europe* 973 (2010): 21. [Translations of texts available only in French are mine.]

7 Lacoue-Labarthe's *Phrase* (2000) has already been called 'the greatest poem of our time'. Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, *Inesthétique et mimésis: Badiou, Lacoue-Labarthe et la question de l'art* (Paris: Lignes, 2010), 134. For a comprehensive list of Lacoue-Labarthe's publications, including his translations and articles, see 'Bibliographie', in *Lignes* 22 (mai 2007), 255–8.

8 Nancy, 'Mimesis', 112.

9 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Bye bye Farewell', *L'Animal: Litératures, Arts & Philosophie* 19–20 (2008): 193.

10 The articles presented in the context of *Parole sans frontière*, including Lacoue-Labarthe's 'L'horreur occidentale', are now available online: *http://www.p-s-f.com/psf/spip.php?rubrique28*, accessed 20 October 2011.

11 Hillis Miller's 'Prologue' (17).

12 Joseph Conrad, 'Preface', in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (New York: Doubleday, 1924), xiv.

13 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Phrase* (Paris: Bourgois, 2000), 17.

14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and transl. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 464–564, 485.

15 Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Philippe', in *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: La césure et l'impossible*, ed. Jacob Rogozinski (Paris: Lignes, 2010), 427.

16 On the concept of '*retrait*', see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997), viii–ix. On the concept of 'echo', see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'The Echo of the Subject' in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. and trans. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 139–207.

17 Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Bye', 196. See also 'Typography' in *Typography*, 43–138, 117.

18 Derrida, 'Desistance', 14.

19 See Plato, Book 2 of the *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Bollingen Series, 1963), 377a–8e, 623–5. On 'type' and 'figure', see also Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Typography', 54–55.

20 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Nazi Myth', trans. Brian Holmes, *Critical Inquiry* 16.2 (1990): 298.

21 In 'Plato's Pharmacy', Derrida writes that '*mimesis* is akin to the *pharmakon*', 'it has no nature, nothing properly its own' (139). And, indeed, many of the defining characteristics of the *pharmakon*, as Derrida understands it, are the same as the characteristics of *mimesis* as Lacoue-Labarthe understands it: 'The "essence" of the *pharmakon*' writes Derrida 'lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no "proper" characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical. . .) of the word, a *substance*. The *pharmakon* has no ideal identity'. Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination*, transl. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61–171, 125–6. Lacoue-Labarthe acknowledges this debt in 'Typography', 101.

22 As Lacoue-Labarthe puts it elsewhere, '[i]n the apocalypse of Auschwitz, it is nothing more and nothing less than the West, in its essence, that revealed itself – and that since, continues to reveal itself'. *La fiction du politique* (Paris: Bourgois, 1987), 59.

23 On this modern tradition, see *L'imitation des modernes (Typographies 2)* (Paris: Galilée, 1986). On the relation between 'tradition' and 'truth', see 'Tradition et vérité à partir de la philosophie' *Europe* 973 (2010): 61–7.

24 This thesis is developed on the basis of an engagement with Aristotle's conception of 'mimesis' in *L'imitation des modernes*, and is most clearly developed in his opening chapter on Diderot, 'Le paradoxe et la mimésis', 15–36.

25 Lacan calls *la Chose*, what he calls 'the absolute Other of the subject' (65) and is thus beyond 'representation' [*Vorstellung*] and 'signification' [*hors-signifié*] (67). In the chapter on 'Das Ding', in Seminar VII, Lacan reminds us that philosophers have reduced *Vorstellung* to what he calls, 'an empty body, a phantom, a pale nightmare of the relation to the world', a description which is not without analogies with

Kurtz. *Le séminare, livre VII. L'éthique de la psychanalyse (1959–60)* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 75. On Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis of the Lacanian *la Chose*, see also 'De l'éthique: à propos d'Antigone', in *Lacan avec les philosphes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), 33–5.

26 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'Nazi Myth', 154.

27 As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy explain, one of the essential ingredients in fascism is *emotion*, collective, mass emotion'; and then they add: 'emotion always joins itself to *concepts*' ('Nazi Myth', 294). For a pioneering essay that addresses the question of the Holocaust, but from a different perspective, see Debra Romanick Baldwin, 'The Horror and the Human': the Politics of Dehumanization in *Heart of Darkness* and Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*' *Conradiana* 37.3 (2005): 185–204.

28 Lacoue-Labarthe's career-long engagement with Heidegger's conception of '*techne*' involves a confrontation with the German philosopher's implication with the Nazi party, as well as his subsequent refusal to acknowledge this engagement. On Heidegger and Nazism, see esp. *La fiction du politique*, and 'Neither an Accident Nor a Mistake' *Critical Inquriy* 15.2 (1989): 481–4. On Heidegger, myth and politics, see *Heidegger: la politique du poème* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), esp. 22–38.

29 Derrida, 'Desistance', 15.

Je me demandais, je me demande encore en
quelle langue, sinon celle des morts,
cela l'avait-il traversé et s'était-il écrit.
Une langue, j'en suis convaincu, tout autant
étrangère, à traduire et traduire, sans répit,
que celle que je pense mienne.[1]

LACOUE-LABARTHE, *Phrase*

[1] Speaking of the concluding lines of/*Heart of Darkness*/Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe writes in/*Phrase*/:

I would ask myself, and I still ask myself in
which language, if not the one of the dead,
this had traversed him and had been written.
A language, I am convinced, as
foreign, to translate and re-translate, incessantly,
as the one that I think mine. (Editor's translation)